

ART AND RE MOSQUE LAMP

Imagine you are in a mosque seven hundred years ago. It is early morning and still dark. You hear the beautiful sound of sacred prayers being sung and smell incense. As you look up, you see the bright glow of hanging lamps that remind you of the description of Allah's light in the holy Qur'an and you return to your prayers.

This mosque lamp from Egypt is an iconic sacred object from the period when the sultans (royal rulers) ruled with the help of the Mamluks, a community of ex-slaves who became the military protectors of the sultan from the mid-13th to early 16th centuries CE.

We know that this lamp was one of about 20 that were commissioned by the Great Amir Sayf al-Dīn Shaykhū al-'Umarī, one of the most powerful Mamluk amirs (military rulers) in the mid-14th century CE. On the lamp we see a red cup – the official blazon (emblem) of Shaykhū al-'Umarī – which reminds us the amir was cup-bearer to the sultan and had his greatest trust.



MOSQUE LAMP

IN DETAIL



DATE	1350-1357
MATERIALS	Glass with enamel decoration and gilding
SIZE	Height: 39.4 cm Diameter: 27.8 cm
PLACE	Cairo, Egypt
MAKER	Unknown

MOSQUE LAMP



IN DETAIL

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CONSIDERING THE SACRED: FLAME AND LIGHT

The mosque lamp can be classified as a sacred object in the following two ways:

- Used in a sacred act: it is used to light a mosque where the Muslim community come to pray. Lighting the oil lamp for prayers would be a sacred act.
- Expressing belief: the lamp's decorations are sacred in themselves. The designs would remind Muslims of Allah's creation on earth and the garden of paradise. The script is from the Verse of Light and explains the metaphor of Allah as light in a niche or nook.

The lamps would be hung from the ceiling of the mosque by chains attached to their handles. They would enhance the architecture of the mosque, through their suspension and height, their physical forms and in the light they created.

DISCUSS



- How do you think the presence of the lit mosque lamps might contribute to Muslims' experience of their prayer?
- Why do you think natural flames (a lamp, a candle or a fire) are so common in sacred buildings, religious practices and rituals?
- Are there any connections with secular events or places that involve flames?



The inscription on this lamp is in thuluth script, and is from the Qur'an, Sūra 24, the beginning of verse 35, the Sūrat al-Nūr (Verse of Light). This is the Qur'anic phrase most widely used on mosque lamps and may be translated as follows:

'Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche, in which there is a lamp'.

- Try to describe what this verse is saying. What does this tell us about Allah's light?
- Why is light a useful way to describe Allah?
- How does the mosque lamp represent this quality of Allah?

SURAH OF LIGHT: METAPHOR AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

DISCUSS



'Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp; the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things.' (24:34)

- Why is the language of metaphor an appropriate way to think or speak about Allah in the Qur'an?
- Why is the language of metaphor useful to describe religious concepts like transcendence or mystery?
- How is art similar to the religious (and non-religious) language of metaphor?



'[Such niches are] in houses [i.e., mosques] which Allah has ordered to be raised and that His name be mentioned [i.e., praised] therein; exalting Him within them in the morning and the evenings.' (24: 35)

- How does the tradition of the Mamluk mosque lamp relate to this passage?
- How does this affect your view of the mosque lamp?
- Should the mosque lamp be in a museum? If it belonged to you, what would you do with it?
- How would you make and design a contemporary mosque lamp? Include texts and designs that present your interpretation of the function and form of this holy object.

CONSIDERING PATRONAGE AND TRADE

The Great Amir Sayf al-Dīn Shaykhū al-'Umarī would have commissioned 20 of these beautiful and expensive mosque lamps. The act of paying for these sacred objects would have been a demonstration of his piety. Those who attended the mosque would have known this as they would recognise the amir's blazon.

The practice of rulers or wealthy patrons commissioning art and artists for sacred objects has been widespread since the time of the Mamluks. For example, early Western European Renaissance paintings for churches often included a depiction of the patron who paid for the painting in a holy scene.

In the 19th century mosque lamps became very popular among European art collectors. They were seen as exotic and represented a romantic idea of the 'East' or 'Orientalism'. This began, in a sense, with the establishment of the Silk Road and the trade of spices, treasures and textiles from China and the Middle East to Europe.

Today, a different but comparable trade exists in natural resources and labour, as well as the movement of philosophies and practices like Buddhism and yoga from the east to the west.

DISCUSS



- Why might the Great Amir Sayf al-Dīn Shaykhū al-'Umarī want his donation to be known to the religious community?
- Can we learn anything about his relationship with his faith and with the religious community from this lamp?
- What can we surmise about the amir's image as a leader?
- If patrons pay for a religious object, should their donation of money be advertised or anonymised? What matters to society? What is more holy?
- Is patronage of religious art ever altruistic?
- Is it possible to give without the need for recognition?



- Cheap clothing and products depend on a trade of underpaid and exploitative labour. How can social justice be made possible within this system? What can religious and philanthropic organisations do about this?
- Yoga is a spiritual practice and yet it is also purged of spirituality in some secular 'keep fit' contexts. Is this right?

CONSIDERING MINERALS, GEMSTONES AND NATURAL DESIGNS

The designs on the lamp are made with an enamel technique that originates from the Mamluk period. These techniques would later be adopted by European artists.

The red is made with zinc oxide and the blue is made with lapis lazuli, a very rare rock formation found in the caves of Afghanistan. 'Lapis' is Latin for 'stone' and 'lazuli' is the Latin version of the Ancient Persian name for an area where the stone was mined. It is where the word 'azure' comes from. Highly valued by ancient Egyptian civilisations, lapis lazuli was deemed to contain magical properties.

When European traders discovered lapis lazuli, it was soon prized higher than gold once it arrived finally by boat to the ports of Venice. The Virgin Mary's association with this colour is attributed to this high value; indeed, patrons would specifically pay for the mineral to be used in commissioned paintings.

DISCUSS



- Why do you think lapis lazuli captured the attention of so many civilisations and communities?
- Why is it associated with magic and holiness?
- Does blue have any other associations for you?

The designs of flowers and fish are woven into the design of the lamp. When lit, the floral decoration would have inspired thoughts of a heavenly garden of paradise, or Janna, described more than a hundred times in the Qur'an.

'So Allah rewarded them for what they said with gardens [in Paradise] beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally. And that is the reward of doers of good.' (5: 85)

- The garden of paradise exists in Islam as well as other religious traditions. How does the image of a garden relate to heaven?
- Can you find any secular texts or images with description or depictions of nature that are comparable to religious ideas of heaven or holiness?

IN DETAIL



CONSIDERING IMPERFECTION AND ART

The glass in the mosque lamp is brownish in colour because the sand in Egypt used to create the glass was darker coloured.

The bubbles in the lamps are reminders of the imperfections of handblown glass.

Should sacred art be 'perfect'?

What are the sacred advantages of imperfection?

How is the creation of art an act of devotion?

Can you explore any other examples that might be considered art as an act of devotion in the Wallace Collection?